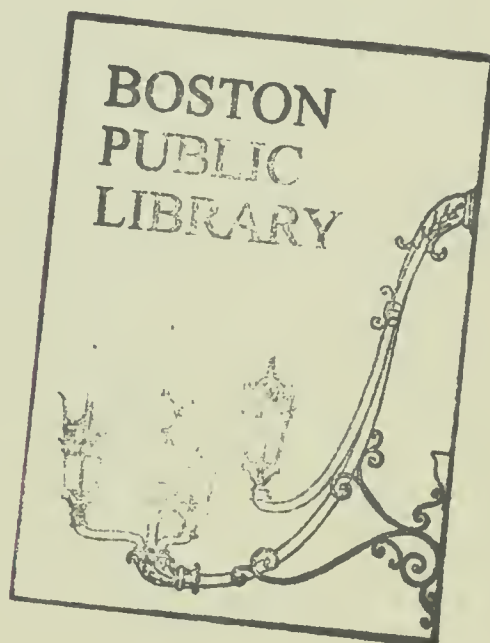


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THE BACK BAY - ITS HISTORY
AND DEVELOPMENT



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Boston originally contained about 780 acres of land. This area was too small to provide homes for towns much smaller than Boston when it became a City in 1822. It became necessary to reclaim harbor flats and the tidal marshes which surrounded the original peninsula.

Of all the made-land Districts which form the Greater part of the total area of the city proper, the Back Bay is the largest and the most important one. The Back Bay was the ~~fin~~^{fin}-de-siècle which not only reclaimed much land for Boston's building but changed its topography when it became part of the green belt of parks beginning at the Mass. General Hospital along the Charles across the Back Bay to Brookline and Roxbury. The story really begins in Boston in 1803 when Charles Street was laid out across the bottom of the common which then bordered the Charles River, all of this territory is "made land". Originally the "Back Bay" was a cove or an arm of the Charles River which at high water spread inland from the foot of Washington Street and thence along the adjacent shore and that of the Neck to Brookline. Into this bay from Roxbury projected a salt marsh peninsula known as Gravelly Point. (Prudential site) The first improvement made in this locality was the laying out of Charles Street in 1803.

At the beginning of the 19th century the aspect of the Back Bay was similar to that of Dorchester Bay; being at flood tide a beautiful sheet of water, spreading out from the city with the Brookline hills rising beyond, much as the Blue Hills are seen from

South Boston, with no bridge, dam, or causeway, barring the view of rural Cambridge nestling amid its elms at the foot of Mount Auburn, between the West Boston and Brighton bridges. The entering wedge for the great change was the chartering of the Boston and Roxbury Mill Corporation in 1814. Its purpose was twofold, the utilization of the water-power of the great basin made by dams thrown across it, and the use of these dams as causeways for a roadway between Boston and Roxbury and the western suburbs.

It was intended to erect power mills for grinding flour and paint among other uses. A prospectus to interested investors envisioned 6 Grist Mills, 8 flour mills, 6 saw mills, 16 cotton and 8 woolen mills and cannon, anchor, guns and numerous other commodities - needless to say with such an inducement the stich was quickly oversubscribed - the mills hours later proved to be unprofitable and were eventually abandoned.

The "Mill Dam," now lower Beacon Street and the "Cross Dam" or Parker Street; and the causeway now known as Brookline Avenue, were thrown across the Bay to serve as the nucleus for the consolidation of the intervening mass. At this time waters of the Bay lapped the margin of the present Washington Street at the Neck, (South End), and of the marsh which has since become the Public Garden. In 1821 the Mill-Dam was finished. The Business of the Corporation was divided in 1824, when the Boston Water Power Company was incorporated to use the water-power of the mill corporation. In 1832 the new company took possession of the mills and water-power, and the land south of the Mill-Dam; the mill corporation retaining the

roads and the lands north of the dam. The incorporation of the Boston and Worcester and Boston and Providence Railroad Companies in 1831, with lines across the Back Bay and the concession to Riparian owners of the right to fill their flats, so encroached upon the water-power as to hasten the conversion of the company into a Land Developing Company.

With regards to this action, the following appeared in a local paper at the time

"Would you have your wealth hastily. Just under your eye Mill Pond and South Cove Shores are what you should buy where the flats are filled up, boys, their stock must be good, and like ducks you'll grow fat if you dabble in mud."

A large part of the city sewerage flowing into the basin also rendered its filling necessary on sanitary grounds; and thus in 1849 began the famous outcry against the "Back Bay nuisance", which ended when the last steps for its abatement were taken by the beginning of the Park Improvement in 1876. The Commonwealth had the right to the flats below the line of riparian ownership; and in 1849 a land commission was appointed to deal with the subject of creating new land here. A comprehensive plan was reported in 1852. The territory north of the Mill Dam was to be filled by mill corporation. The Commonwealth took possession of that north of an east and west line drawn from near the present site of the Statler Hotel in Park Square, and the water power company, all south of that line. A short sighted policy was that which permitted the building over of the territory between Beacon Street and Charles River, as that street

might have been placed on the line of beautiful embankment. Three times a proposition made, to give the city 500,000 feet of land on condition that it fill the land, never allow it to be built on and add the territory to the Public Garden, was rejected. The plan of the Back Bay improvement was the work of the late Arthur Gilman, one of the eminent architects of the country.

The work of filling the land was begun energetically in 1857. All the adjacent filled lands, as far as the present New Haven Railroad, including Columbus Avenue is now territorially identified with the South End; the term "Back Bay lands" being applied only to those outside of the Railroad. The Back Bay of today is characterized by broad streets; Commonwealth Avenue, the principal street, is 200 feet wide, with a park in the centre, and the distance 240 feet from house to house.

From Arlington Street to Massachusetts Avenue; on Newbury Street, Commonwealth Avenue, Marlboro and Beacon Streets spawned the Boston town houses which would make Back Bay a descriptive adjective whenever Boston was mentioned. Many of these homes boasted large staffs of servants who catered to the handsomely groomed families of nouveau rich who constituted a large percentage of the Back Bay occupancy. Some of the houses were deceptively simple on the outside not unlike simple brownstones or brick bow fronts elsewhere in the city. While other palaces such as the Burrage mansion in white marble boasted a balcony from Fontainblau, the French Flats of the Back Bay sheltered late in the century, the

beginnings of such Family Hotels as the Bristol and the Brunswick which would, in turn, beget the railroad flats and early apartment houses which now serve so well as medical suites.

The building of Trinity Church and the Public Library in Copley Square ended the Back Bay as a total residential area, later newer streets such as St. Botolph and Garrison and the extensions of Huntington Avenue would open up newer areas for development. The Back Bay and the South End would look across the Railroad tracks toward each other for half a century.

Shortly before the first World War, there was a shift from single family residences to institutional use for many of the Back Bay houses, some less than 35 years old. This trend has unabated since that time and with the educational and rooming house uses have changed the complexion of the entire area. A shift in emphasis has also become apparent. In 1962 no one thinks of Commonwealth Avenue below Massachusetts Avenue as the Back Bay. It is "in town". Most persons now think of the Back Bay as the area beyond the Christian Science Church up to and including the Fenway. Just as strange is a description given of the Back Bay Commonwealth Avenue area as the "new West End" shortly after it was built up in the 1880's.

As the Prudential tower superstructure rises higher it only sharpens the next problem in the history of the Back Bay High rise or No.

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